

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) sent the following letter on September 14, 2010

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to request that during bilateral meetings at the upcoming UN General Assembly, you or other State Department officials raise concerns about religious freedom conditions in Turkey and Uzbekistan, as well as continue to lobby governments to vote against the flawed “defamation of religions” resolution.

With Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan leading the Turkish delegation, the United States should use this opportunity to encourage the Turkish government to address the long-standing lack of full legal recognition for religious minorities, including: Alevis; Greek, Armenian, and Georgian Orthodox Churches; Roman and Syriac Catholic Churches; Protestants; and Jews. In addition, as President Obama noted in his April 2009 address to the Turkish parliament, the United States should continue to urge Turkey to permit all religious minorities to train religious clergy in Turkey, including by reopening the Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Halki.

Turkey has a democratic government, and the country’s constitution calls for the protection of the freedom of belief and worship and the private dissemination of religious ideas. Nonetheless, the Turkish government’s attempt to control religion and its effort to exclude religion from the public sphere based on its interpretation of secularism result in serious religious freedom violations for many of the country’s citizens, including members of majority religious communities. The United States also should work with Turkish authorities to allow women the freedom to express their religious or non-religious views through dress in order to respect both their beliefs and the secular status of the Turkish republic, as well as to remove legal restrictions on the wearing of clerical garb by non-Muslims in public.

President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan will also be in attendance at the General Assembly, and his government harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity, regardless of their religious affiliation. The United States officially has recognized the poor state of religious freedom in Uzbekistan by designating it a “country of particular concern” in 2009 for the government’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The

Uzbek government continues to arrest Muslims and repress individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. Uzbek police and security forces raid and repress members of registered and unregistered religious groups for peaceful religious activity. Members of non-violent unregistered Muslim groups have been convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, such as members of the Nur group. This policy has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons; many reportedly are denied due process and are subjected to torture.

Though security threats do exist in Uzbekistan, including from members of groups that claim a religious linkage, these threats do not excuse or justify the scope and severity of the Uzbek government's maltreatment of religious communities. Religious minorities, especially those viewed as engaging in proselytism, also are targeted—a Pentecostal pastor and three Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned. Meetings on the margins of UNGA provide an opportunity for the United States to vigorously press for concrete legal reforms and for the release of prisoners jailed due to their religion or belief as a condition for further improvements in the bilateral relationship.

Finally, we appreciate the diligent work of the State Department regarding the "defamation of religions" issue. As you know, members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), especially Egypt and Pakistan, have repeatedly introduced "defamation" resolutions that attempt to limit the freedoms of religion and expression. Another such resolution is expected to be introduced during this session of the General Assembly, which will have many of the fatal flaws of previous versions. Due in part to the State Department's efforts, support at the UN for these resolutions has declined since 2008. In fact, in March 2010, a "defamation of religions" resolution received the fewest yes votes and most no votes ever cast on this issue in the UN Human Rights Council or its predecessor, coming within four votes of defeat. Continued U.S. opposition and leadership is critical, and the United States should redouble its efforts to finally defeat this resolution at the General Assembly. We urge you and your colleagues in all bilateral meetings to press delegations to vote against the flawed "defamation of religions" resolution.

We have focused our attention on Turkey and Uzbekistan because these are countries for which very high-level meetings already have been scheduled to coincide with the General Assembly session. Needless to say, however, if time permitted and other opportunities presented themselves, we would favor having issues of freedom of religion raised with each of the countries you meet with in New York that we have recommended for designation as CPCs. We have supplied a number of Assistant Secretaries and other key State Department officials with copies of the Commission's annual report, which can be used as a resource for raising issues regarding these other countries.

Sincerely,  
Leonard Leo

Chair

CC: Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor  
Esther Brimmer, Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs  
Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia  
Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary for Europe and Eurasia

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at [tcarter@uscirf.gov](mailto:tcarter@uscirf.gov) This e-mail address is being protected from spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it or (202) 523-3257.